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Part 1 of 2: Fitness – Essential to Cognitive & Mental Health

April 26, 2012 • [Sean Bourke](#)



“In order for man to succeed in life, God provided him with two means, education and physical activity. Not separately, one for the soul and the other for the body, but for the two together. With the two means, man can attain perfection.” – *Plato*

Dr. John Ratey, opens his book – *Spark: The Evolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* – with this quotation. Ratey illustrates the essential integration of body and mind with an array of evidence. We’ve spent years hearing about how critical fitness is for both muscle building and cardiovascular health. Intuitively, we also know what a difference movement can make in our mental state. Ratey provides compelling and motivating evidence that getting off the couch and moving will nourish not only your body, but also your mind.

We evolved to move, says Ratey, but modern technology and amenities have “engineered movement right out of our lives.” Paradoxically, we have emerged more stressed than ever. Our “fight or flight” response is in motion, yet we remain motionless. That imbalance causes cognitive deterioration, i.e., we’re not as “sharp”. With diminished mental health arises higher levels of anxiety, depression, and addiction.

Fortunately, there’s a simple solution. A 2000 Duke study showed exercise to be just as effect as Zoloft (Sertraline) at treating depression. That’s just the tip of this book’s iceberg; Ratey provides a deluge of evidence showing how essential exercise is to one’s mental health. In so doing, he moves beyond the negative image of exercise as a battle between pain and gain on the road to a distant and difficult goal like weight loss or health. Ratey demonstrates that exercise is a crucial component in determining the quality of your day-to-day existence. Movement improves how we feel, how we learn, and how we engage with each other.

As an example, he cites a case study involving a school system in Naperville, Illinois, which used a before-school physical education class (PE4life) to reconnect students’ bodies and their brains. Following their morning fitness intervention, in an international TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) test taken by 230,000 students, the Naperville 8th graders raised their worldwide scores to 6th in math and 1st in science. The morning activity nourished their brains, making them more attentive, more receptive, and better able to grasp complex ideas. What was good for their bodies was also good for their brains.

What I loved about *Spark* is that Dr. Ratey lays out the science underlying these benefits but describes those changes in lay terms that makes them tangible. He explains exactly what happens in the brain that makes the morning movement an effective learning tool. He writes, “when the students...go for a mile run in gym, they are more prepared to learn in their other classes: their senses are heightened; their focus and mood are improved; they’re less fidgety and tense; and they feel more motivated and invigorated. The same goes for adults in the classroom of life...In addition to priming our state of mind, exercise influences learning directly, at the cellular level, improving the brain’s potential to log in and process new information.”

Looking at exercise and learning on a cellular level is fascinating. Exploring how the various neurotransmitters, dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine are balanced through exercise; how exercise induces brain derived neurotrophic growth factor (BDNF), which fertilizes your brain cells in a way that helps you learn, grow new cells that you need, and to stay mentally sharp as you age. *(Look for Part 2 of this post on 4/26.)*

About Sean Bourke

Dr. Bourke is a physician and co-founder of JumpstartMD. He is passionate about helping others transform their lives for the better through their meals, movement, and mindset. [\[Read bio\]](#)

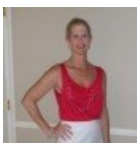
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